

RUTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
*Quarterly*

VOLUME 30 No. 2

2000

**In Search of  
Henry Safford Fiske**



COURTESY OF S.L. FISKE

*The Reverend Henry Safford Fiske, artist and minister (1849-1909).*



(Top) St. Paul's Universalist Church at 46 [now 113] West Street was dedicated 23 January 1890. (Below) Title page of H.S. Fiske's Rutland sketchbook.

H.S. Fiske.  
 28. West St.,  
 Rutland,  
 Vt.

1891.

# **In Search of Henry Safford Fiske**

by Stephen Longfellow Fiske

In my family apartment where I grew up in New York City, there hung a very handsome oil painting of Grand Isle in Lake Champlain, the picturesque lake whose shores straddle upstate New York and Vermont. It was painted by my great grandfather, Henry Safford Fiske, who had been a nineteenth century/turn of the century artist as well as a minister in the Universalist Church. I never knew much about my great grandfather but as I myself became an art student at New York's High School of Music and Art and then an art major at New York University, I grew to appreciate the level of mastery that his painting displayed. Henry Safford Fiske was obviously a schooled and skilled craftsman of the landscape genre.

In our family photo album was a picture of my family taken when I was four years old. We were posed in front of a stone church with a tower, in Rutland, Vermont. It was the church where my great grandfather had been minister. He had been instrumental in raising funds and paying off the debt for the completion of its construction. Henry Safford Fiske's son, Albert Rantoul Fiske (my grandfather), followed in his father's footsteps and had also become a minister. He was pastor of that very church at the time of this photo, in 1950. Once known as St. Paul's, the church is the historic Universalist-Unitarian church at 46 West Street. The painting of Lake Champlain had no doubt been done by my great grandfather during his ministry at St. Paul's in the early 1890's.

After college, I moved to California and pursued my career as a songwriter/performer/author and sometimes artist. With my wife Nikki, we raised a family of three children. I did not give any further thought to my great grandfather until my aunt's death in 1994.

My Aunt Ruth was the last remaining member of my father's side of the family. My Dad had died when I was fifteen. Aunt Ruth was an art teacher and painter who lived in Windsor, New York. As my sister, my mother and I were going through my aunt's belongings in the process of taking care of her modest estate, I discovered a sketchbook tucked away in a vault in her attic studio. The sketchbook was dated 1891 and had the signature, H.S. Fiske, with a Rutland address, 48 West Street.

Sitting in my aunt's cottage, holding that sketchbook in my hand, I knew that I was in possession of a family treasure. As I myself have enjoyed countless hours of pencil sketching from nature over the years, I was deeply moved by the lineage link I felt as I thumbed through the landscape renderings in the 4 by 7-inch hard-covered sketchbook. In turning the pages from study to study, I also knew I was viewing a very fine example of American landscape artistry, reminiscent of the Hudson River School and a legitimate representation of American folk art of the late nineteenth century.



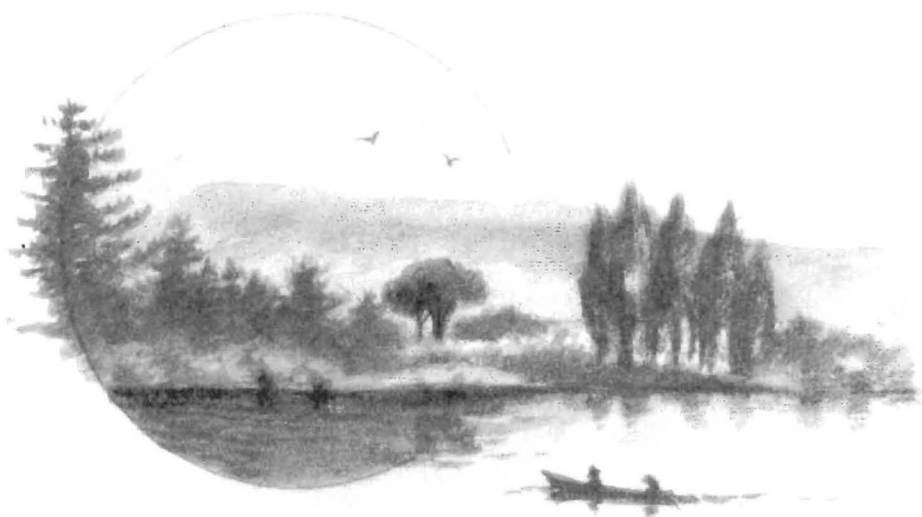
*Near Rutland Vermont.*

The sketchbook was filled with scenes of rural Rutland, drawn by my great grandfather during his ministry at St. Paul's church. Each postcard-sized study, done in pencil, India ink and sepia, is a gem in tonal nuances, perspective, and exquisite attention to detail. There are no errant brushstrokes, no re-drawn lines. It was obvious to me that every rendering was done by a skilled and well-honed hand, led by an eye of unerring observational ability and intense focus. The viewer is never in doubt of the artist's deep sensitivity and technical command. Each picture draws you into its topographical distance through the artist's mastery of perspective and captures the vibrant spirit of the verdant countryside. In addition to the scenes of Rutland, the sketchbook also contains several studies of the ruins of Fort Ticonderoga, now since reconstructed, and of Lake Champlain. The artist identifies the location of each picture with handwritten notes on the bottom or in the corner. The viewer feels certain of the accuracy and authenticity with which the artist has depicted his subject matter. In discovering the sketchbook, I knew I was in possession of not only a family heirloom, but a work of artistic and historic significance.

I was also personally moved by the similarity in style of my great grandfather's drawings to my own. All I had ever seen of his work before that day in my aunt's attic had been that one painting of Lake Champlain. I found myself filled with a powerful sense that encoded in my genes is an undeniable link with the artistic sensitivity of my great grandfather. As I gazed at each of his pictures, it was as if I were living through his eyes, as if I were experiencing his experience in drawing these studies, feeling his feelings as he sat on a log or a stone in the countryside, lost in his meditative, artistic absorption. I instantly felt close to him, yet I knew nothing about him.

I was filled with countless questions... What was his life like? What was he like? Besides Rutland, where else did he live? When and where was he born? When and where did he die? What were his dreams, his struggles, his triumphs? Where did he study art? How and when did he assume his ministry? Surely such a skilled artist must have a larger body of work and what happened to it? Did he ever exhibit? Does anyone still alive know anything about him? Is there any documentation or records of him and his life work? Was he ever recognized by the art community, museums, or collectors? Was the only historic legacy of such a fine artist as Henry Safford Fiske relegated to the dusty archive vault in the attic of a deceased descendent?

There was no one to answer my questions. My mother knew very little about my great grandfather except that he had married Annie Longfellow, a relative of the renowned American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The last one to have any hand-me-down, hands-on knowledge of Henry Safford Fiske had been my Aunt Ruth, now gone. I regret to this day never asking her about her grandparents. I was just never curious about my ancestry until I held that sketchbook in my hands.



COURTESY OF S.L. FISKE

### *On Lake Champlain*

But there was more to find than the sketchbook. In a photo album book in the same vault were other small, sketchbook-size pencil drawings and pen and ink and gouache paintings, mounted like photographs, glued on old fashioned black pages. Each study was labeled as to location: scenes in Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Again and again with each picture, I experienced a sense of spiritual connectedness to my ancestor and his artistic process. Many of these small studies, I felt, were preliminary works for oil paintings. Some were marked with reference to color. I could almost feel my great grandfather's meditative

energy as I sensed that he was looking ahead with each study to its further evolution as an oil painting. But where were the paintings?

I scoured the dusty attic of my aunt's home but no more art of Henry Safford Fiske was to be found...only some photos and letters, clues to the unknown tracings of his life. In addition to the Lake Champlain picture, my mother recalled two other paintings by my great grandfather that had been in our family possession. They had become damaged and badly chipped. She had thought they were unrestorable and so had discarded them. My mother said that my grandparents might have had some of his paintings, but that as my grandfather would move from church to church ranging from Illinois to Long Island, my grandparents often left belongings in storage, sometimes never reclaiming them. Could any of Henry Safford Fiske's paintings in my grandparents' possession have been carelessly left behind, lost in storage rooms? Had other paintings, ill-cared-for and deteriorated over time, simply been thrown away? Could there be any of his paintings or any information to be found about him in Rutland?

From my aunt's cottage in Windsor, I called the Unitarian-Universalist Church in Rutland, where I was referred to Janet Martin, whose family's generations reached back to the time my great grandfather was pastor at St. Paul's. Even though she was the acting historian of the church, Janet was unable to give me much information. Yes, she said, Henry Safford Fiske was the third minister of St. Paul's Church, from 1891 to 1894, but there were virtually no records or documentation of his ministry, except for a few treasury entries. And no, there were no paintings or artwork of his that she knew of around the church or in the community. Thus began my ongoing search to discover the unknown story of my great grandfather and to find any more of his lost artwork.

I promised myself that I would someday visit that church in Rutland, where both my great grandfather and grandfather had been ministers, and that I would find the answers to my questions. I returned to Los Angeles from Windsor, New York, and kept my collection of H.S. Fiske's small drawings and paintings (approximately fifty) safely tucked away. Through a Fiske genealogy (Pierce), I learned some information, but the chronology of that publication only went through 1895. For the next few years, in the course of my professional and family life, my search for Henry Safford Fiske remained on the back burner.

Then, in 1998, I unexpectedly received an invitation to speak and perform in Vermont, which providentially placed me within twenty miles of Rutland. My fascination with the life and art of my great grandfather was rekindled. I knew this was my opportunity to visit the church and the area where he had lived and painted. I connected with the Unitarian-Universalist Church in Rutland and they invited me to speak at their Sunday service. It was indeed an honor and a kind of spiritual homecoming to enter that church and speak from the same pulpit as my forefathers. Naturally, I brought my collection of Henry Safford Fiske's art to Vermont, along with an eager willingness to show it to anyone who could help me in my search.





*The one exception to the landscape subject matter found in Aunt Ruth's collection of my great grandfather's work is a stunning small portrait in watercolor and pen and ink that Henry, the fiancé, painted of his teenaged bride-to-be Annie Longfellow, created when he was studying art with G. W. Southward and Samuel L. Gerry.*

In Montpelier, curator Jackie Calder of the Vermont Historical Society informed me that a Henry Safford Fiske painting was in the collection of the Lynn Historical Society and Museum in Massachusetts. It was a painting of an historical building, the Galluecia House, now no longer standing. This was the only painting of his that she could find listed in any collection. I was disappointed that more of his work was not known, but glad at least to have found one of his paintings in a collection. Despite his “unlisted” and unknown status, all the collectors, curators, historians and appraisers that I saw agreed that Henry Safford Fiske’s work was of a high quality, and that my collection was a significant find. It would be great to discover additional paintings and to learn more about his life. Eventually, through the assistance of the Rutland Historical Society, the Vermont Historical Society, the Unitarian-Universalist Church, and other genealogical and New England historical sources, I was able to trace the trail of my great grandfather’s life.

Henry Safford Fiske was born in 1849 in what is now Peabody, Massachusetts, the son of a shoemaker. He was educated in the Commonwealth public schools and studied painting and landscape with G.W. Southward of Salem, and with Samuel L. Gerry in Boston. Both of these teachers were also known for portraits and miniatures, which explains my great grandfather’s proficiency in small genre painting. Henry adopted the profession of artist and was a teacher for a few years in the Salem Freehand Evening Drawing School. During this time, he also had a studio in Boston. He married Annie Frances Longfellow in Lynn, Massachusetts, in 1872. He was 24; she was 18.

After coming in touch with a Reverend Dr. Shinn, my great grandfather took an interest in the ministry of the Universalist Church. At that time, Universalism (which in 1961 merged with the Unitarian church) was a young and growing, progressive religious movement. In its liberalism, Universalism was breaking away from traditional, restrictive, Puritanical thought, and was spurred on by the Transcendentalist writers of New England, such as Emerson and Thoreau. Attracted to this movement, the young Fiske went to Concord, New Hampshire, and studied for the ministry with Reverend E. L. Conger, resulting in his ordination in 1879 at West Rumney, New Hampshire. He moved from there to Henniker in the same state, where he built a church and remained four years. He then took pastorates in Newfields, New Hampshire, and Pittsfield, Maine.

In Newfields, Henry and Annie had twin sons, Albert Rantoul and Augustine Longfellow, born on Christmas Day, 1885. Tragically, through a childhood illness, Augustine died in Pittsfield at the age of three years and two months. Albert Rantoul became my grandfather.

Henry Safford Fiske came to Rutland in 1891, succeeding the Reverend Dr. Shinn at St. Paul’s Universalist Church. The Fiske family took residence in the parish house (no longer standing) right next to the newly constructed, marble church. To supplement his monthly minister’s income of \$129.00, Henry fell back on his professional art training and taught art and sold paintings. When he wasn’t busy with his ministerial duties of preaching at Sunday morning and evening services, as



well as presiding over weddings, funerals, baptisms, and attending church functions, various conventions, social and civic events, he obviously enjoyed traveling in the countryside to sketch and paint.

# EXHIBITION AND SALE

— OF —

## LOCAL AND OTHER VIEWS

— AT —

### CHALMERS' ART STORE.

Original Views of Scenery in and about  
RUTLAND, KILLINGTON, SHREWSBURY  
AND PICO, from several points of view.  
ALSO, MOUNT DESERT, HUDSON RIVER  
AND OTHER VIEWS.

Finished in India Ink by the artist, H. S. FISKE.

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RUTLAND DAILY HERALD

In the *Rutland Daily Herald* H. S. Fiske took out an advertisement for an "exhibition and sale of local and other views," at Chalmer's art store. On another occasion, in 1892, during a "May Festival" given by the ladies of the Universalist Church at the Town Hall, the *Daily Herald* gives the following description: "The booths were attractively arranged on the east and north sides of the hall. There were lots of fancy articles and many useful things for sale. In the art booths were some paintings and drawings of scenes in this locality in oil and India ink. They were the work of the pastor, Rev. H. S. Fiske. Mr. Fiske spent several years in the study of painting before taking up the ministry."

The first minister of St. Paul's, G.W. Perry, had established a church retreat and camp at Grand Isle on Lake Champlain, which H.S. Fiske visited and often used as a base for his artwork and contemplations (hence the painting of Grand Isle). The Rev. Mr. Perry, also a geologist as well as the Universalist minister in nearby



*View of Lake Champlain from Grand Isle.*

Shoreham, had established the Rutland English and Classical Institute in 1889, where art classes were offered and were presumably taught by H. S. Fiske.

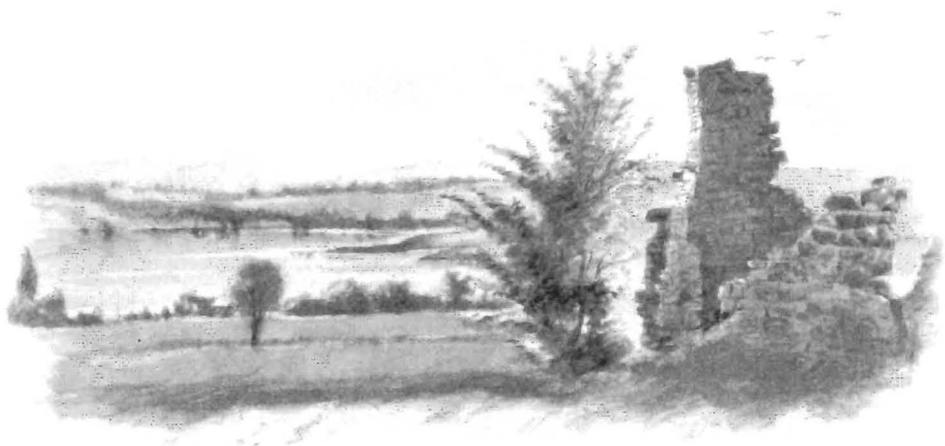
Upon Fiske's resignation from the pulpit of St. Paul's in 1894, according to the *Rutland Herald*, he said that he had accomplished the work he came to do, and that nothing but the pleasantest relations existed between his congregation and himself. "When I came here four years ago," he continued, "the church owed \$7,000 on its building debt, and now it is free from debt." He said that his work in Rutland "had been a hard one...and one of the reasons for my going is that I want a change."

He removed to Methuen, Massachusetts, where he was closer to his family (four brothers and two sisters) and became minister of the Universalist church

there. His last ministry was in North Jay, Maine, close to his wife's family. He died on March 15, 1909, just short of his sixtieth birthday, in Beverly, Massachusetts, of typhoid pneumonia. The *Beverly Times* wrote, "Mr. Fiske was a prominent clergyman for many years, but of late, had been less active in ministerial work. He was an artist of much ability and had lately devoted much of his time to that profession. A man of genial temperament and pleasing address, he made many friends who mourn his loss today."

While I was doing my research and writing this article for publication, I was referred to the Boston Public Library Fine Arts Department. I was told that they have perhaps the most comprehensive index of New England artists, exhibits, auction records, collections and books. In calling there, from California, I was

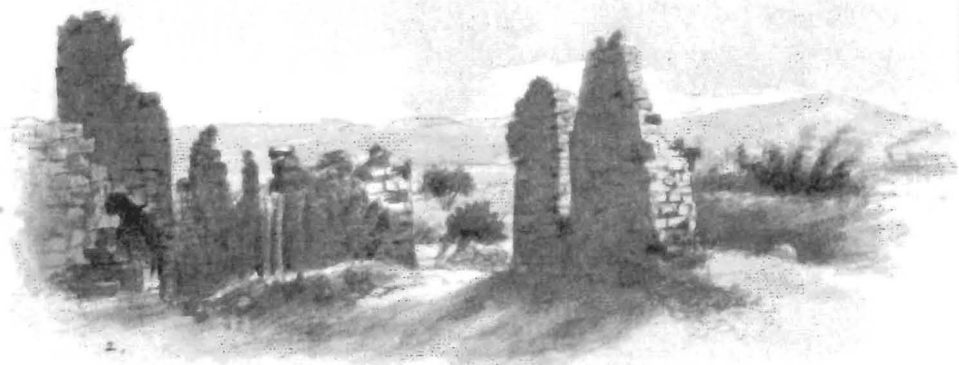




*Lake Champlain and the ruins of Fort Ticonderoga*

informed that the Peabody Essex Museum Maritime Art and History Department had received a donation of thirty-three pencil and wash drawings of New England country scenes by H. S. Fiske. This donation was made in 1953 by a Mrs. M. Sanford Full of Peach's Point, which I learned is in Marblehead, Massachusetts, not far from where my great grandfather grew up, studied art, died and had extended family.

George Schwartz, Assistant Curator of the Peabody Maritime Art Department, further informed me that included in that donation from Mrs. Full were nine of H. S. Fiske's sketchbooks. These sketchbooks, dated from 1870 to 1907, were



*1. The Gateway, Officers Quarters 2. The Old Fire-place*



*Near Woodstock Avenue, Rutland, Vermont, July 4, 1892.*

carefully indexed, and ranged in location from New York State to Maine. No doubt, this was a very thorough collection of his field studies. Thankfully and thoughtfully, it had been kept together in good condition through the years and had somehow wound up in the hands of Mr. W. Sanford Full, an architect and artist, who passed away at 59 years old in 1950. Mrs. Full died in 1965.

Through the local listings in Marblehead I was able to find and speak with two sons and two daughters of the Fulls. None of these surviving children (ages 68 to 75) knew how their father came to possess the collection. I learned that as a draftsman and skilled artist himself, Mr. Full had a fine appreciation for my great grandfather's work, had kept the collection in his library and used it for his own reference. Mr. Full was a member of the Marblehead Arts Association, where he had also exhibited, so perhaps he had acquired the H. S. Fiske Collection through the art community. Or perhaps there was a family connection?

In any event, I was thrilled to make this discovery and booked myself on a flight to Boston to review the collection first hand. Before leaving, I received a phone call from Guilford Full, who said that he had in his possession one of H. S. Fiske's sketchbooks which he had kept as a memento of his father. He had enjoyed having it for many years, and upon hearing my story, graciously offered to give it to me. He said that he was getting on in years, had not much use for it anymore, and would prefer to donate it to a museum, or return it to me and my family. I most thankfully accepted his offer.

On the cover of the sketchbook that Guilford Full gave to me (which was really an old photo album with sketches pasted on the pages) was a stick-on price tag with "\$1.00" crossed out and re-priced at ".50¢". This same type of price tag was

also on some of the sketchbooks at the Peabody. Could Mr. Full have purchased the collection at a garage or estate sale for “.50¢” a book? The mystery of how Mr. Full acquired the collection remains unsolved.

Needless to say, receiving this sketchbook and seeing the collection at the Peabody Museum was, for me, a little like finding precious fragments on the trail of the holy grail. The artwork ranged from quick pencil sketches, to polished pen and wash studies. The subject matter was landscapes, seascapes and buildings, exquisitely rendered. Again, locations were notated at the bottom of each picture, and there were often references to colors, in preparation for his paintings. It confirmed and affirmed what I intuitively suspected all along – that Henry Safford

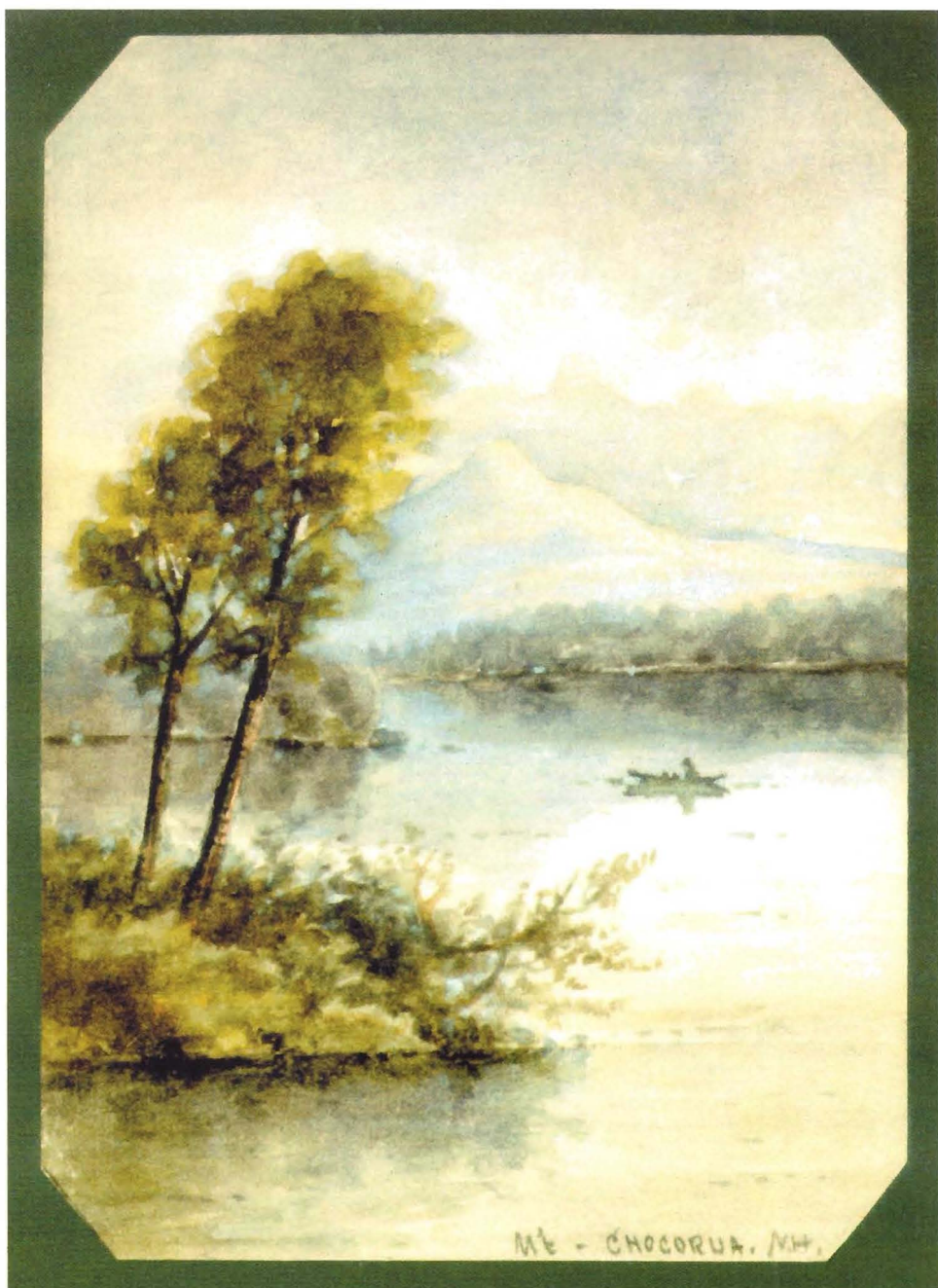
COURTESY OF S.L. FISKE



*Valley of Otter Creek near Rutland.*

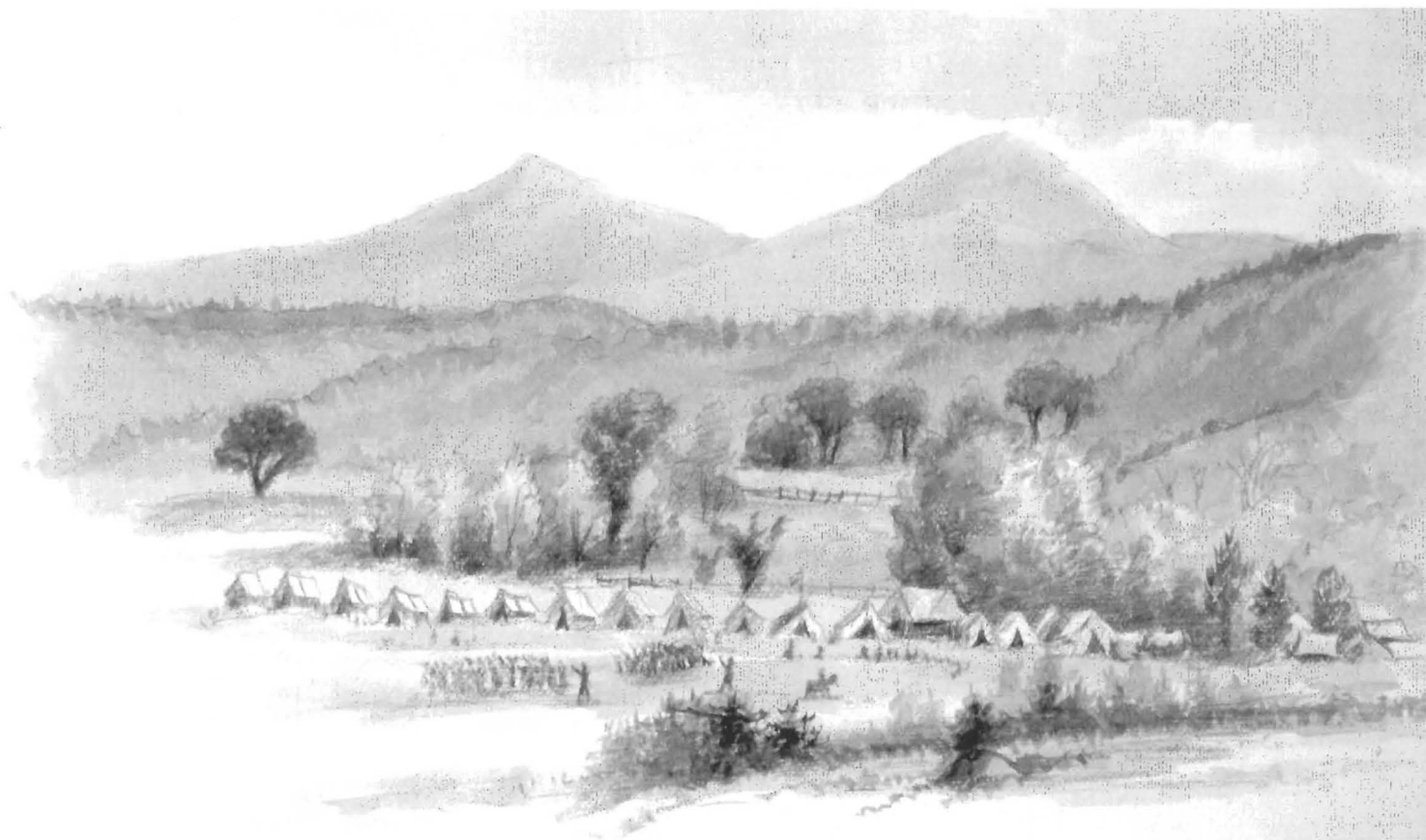
Fiske was a prolific artist who, in addition to his ministerial duties, never wavered in his dedication to drawing and painting. In seeing this body of work, one knew without a doubt, that this was a man whose very fiber vibrated with art, and whose soul sang through his eyes and hand in intimate inspiration. But one big question still remains. Aside from the handsome “Galluecia House” painting at the Lynn Museum and our family painting of Grand Isle, where are the rest of his oil paintings, which are no doubt, the cream of his artistic crop?

Possessed by the soul of the artist to paint and by the calling of the ministry to serve humanity, Henry Safford Fiske lived a simple and honest life of meager means, but rich in the spirit that spoke through him. His ministerial outlook shunned things material. He loved rural New England and chose the communion of the countryside to the hustle and bustle of the cities. He selected remote country parishes for his ministry. He never sought recognition for his artwork, was never



ambitious for an artistic career. There was never a known major exhibit of his work, and his art never entered the broader public sphere. Yet his passion for art and his accomplished skill speak profoundly in the collection that I found in my Aunt Ruth's attic as well as in his other works since discovered.





*Killington and Shrewsbury, from Muster Ground, Rutland, Vermont.*



*From North Main Street, Rutland, Vermont.*



*Otter Creek, Rutland, Vermont.*

I can only assume that wherever he went, he sketched and painted and passed his works along for sale or as gifts to friends, relatives and church congregants. In one of his letters, he promised a niece that he would finish the picture he was painting for her and send it as soon as possible. The greater body of his work, his oil paintings, were no doubt sprinkled around in his travels. I suppose that at the time of his death, his remaining paintings were given to those close to him.

My great grandfather painted on canvas and on boards. It is probable that paintings of his are hanging in homes somewhere, appreciated but unrecognized as the work of Henry Safford Fiske. Perhaps someday, you will walk into such a home or perhaps into a collectibles/antique shop, and find a Henry Safford Fiske landscape, seascape or study of a building, hanging on the wall. He almost always made a note of the picture's location on the corner if it was a sketchbook study or on the back if it was a larger painting. He signed his work "H.S. Fiske" or HSF". In the graveyard of Wenham, Massachusetts, his tall tombstone is engraved: "Henry Safford Fiske...Artist/Preacher." I am happy to have this opportunity to introduce you, at long last, to the art and life of Henry Safford Fiske.

## **About the Author**

Stephen Longfellow Fiske is a singer, songwriter, performer, author and lecturer. He has produced seven albums of his music and is the author of *The Art of Peace*, a poetic handbook on the philosophy of peacemaking, which also includes forty of his drawings. Born in New York City, Stephen lives with his wife, Nikki, in Venice Beach, California, where they have raised three children. He recently had his first art show and is now finishing his second book, *The Basketball Teachings*.



*On the Clarendon Road, Rutland, Vermont.*

### **The Search Goes On**

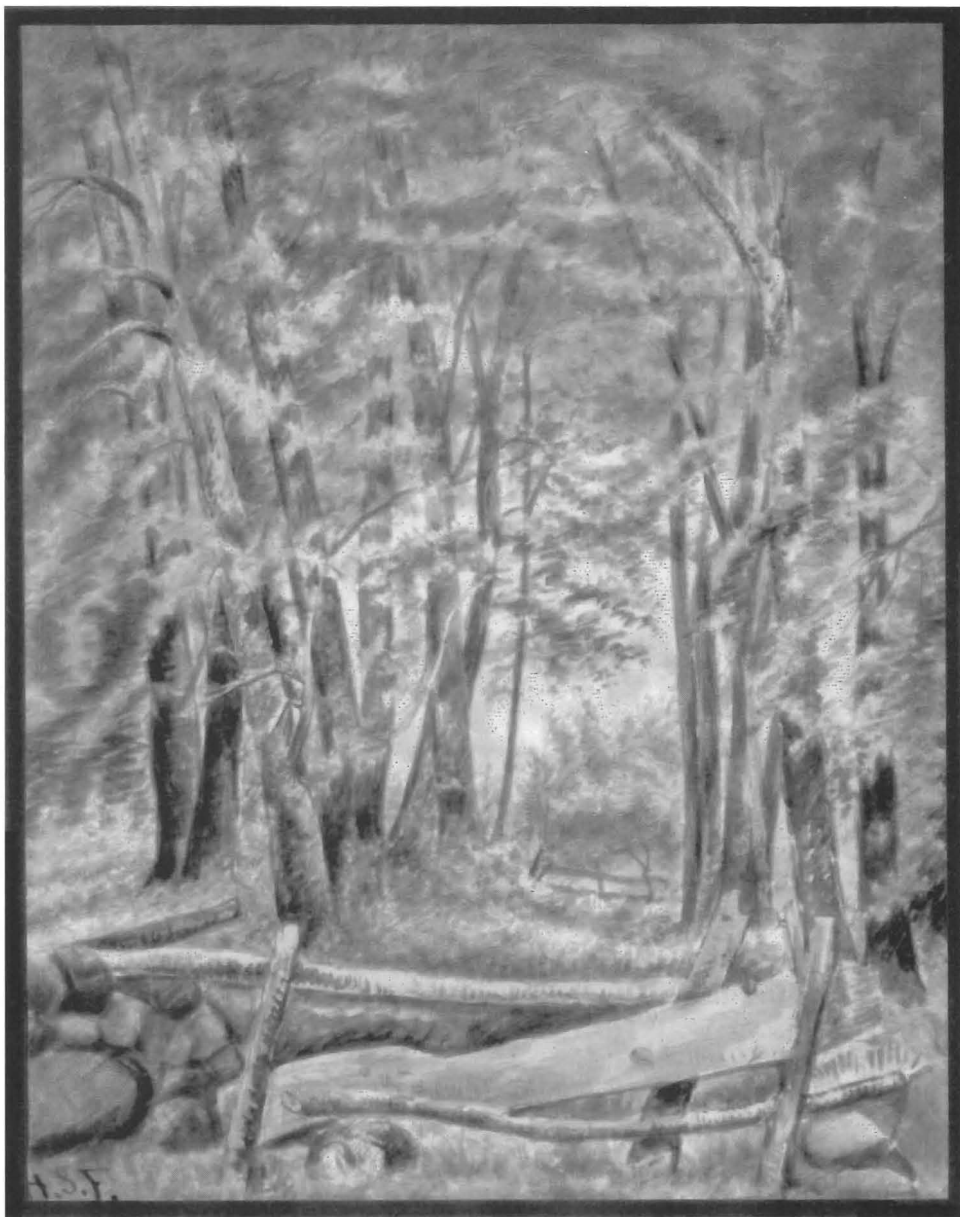
The author is looking for any oil paintings, drawings, letters, photos, documents or information pertaining to Henry Safford Fiske. Please contact Stephen L. Fiske at (310) 396-8205 or write him at: 635 California Avenue, Venice CA 90291.

You may also contact the Rutland Historical Society at (802) 775-2006 or write to the Society at 96 Center Street, Rutland VT 05701-4023.



*Covered bridge near Rutland.*

EDITORS' NOTE: Color reproductions were made possible by a contribution from the author.



*A woodland scene by Henry Safford Fiske.*

The *Quarterly* is published by the Rutland Historical Society, 96 Center Street, Rutland VT 05701-4023. Co-editors: Jim Davidson and Elaine Purdy. Copies are \$2 each plus \$1 per order. Membership in the Society includes a subscription to the *Quarterly* and the *Newsletter*. Copyright © 2000 The Rutland Historical Society, Inc. ISSN 0748-24493.